

The challenge of rural local government

THE interim constitution says that democratic local authority elections should happen every three years. The first of these elections will be held on the same day for all local authorities in South Africa. It is likely that this election will be held late this year.

Elected local authorities will be comprised of 60% ward representation and 40% proportional representation. Half the ward representatives must come from historically African areas and the rest must come from white, coloured and Indian areas.

The period leading to these local authority elections involves three stages:

- *establishing of local negotiating forums

- *decisions by these forums of a process to establish interim local government structures

- *replacement of existing apartheid structures with councils comprising 50% statutory and 50% non-statutory representatives

In urban areas, where poor townships become part of former white municipalities, local government can help to redistribute resources. But in rural areas poor black communities are often far away from trading centres where the resources are concentrated. Long distances between areas makes it difficult to plan and provide essential services like water, sanitation, health care and education. In many of the poor rural areas there is also no history of effective local

government. Simply charging local authorities with the responsibility for service provision and development in rural areas could see the old inequities of apartheid persisting.

To overcome the potential problem of entrenching apartheid inequalities, there is a proposal for rural local authorities to combine in District Councils which would be responsible for service planning and provision.

District Councils would be similar in size to existing Regional Services Councils (RSCs) or Joint Services Boards (JSBs). They would bring together areas such as commercial farmlands, rural settlements, communal areas and small rural towns.

There is growing consensus that District Councils ought to be established before the local authority structures in rural areas are all in place. The Association of Regional Services Councils have proposed that existing local government structures such as RSCs and JSBs be democratised and serve as Interim District Councils. Democratising these structures would mean including in them a range of local statutory and non-statutory bodies. RSCs and JSBs already provide a ready-made pool of resources and expertise. Where they do not exist (in former bantustan areas, for example) it is suggested that they be set up as soon as possible.

At present there is some debate about whether or not

the RSCs and JSBs should simply transform themselves. The Tugela JSB proposed on May 19 to increase their levies by 10% to fund establishment of 13 rural district councils in their area of operation.

Current decision-making structures on local government issues include Provincial Committees For Local Government and Local Government Demarcation Boards. Provincial Committees For Local Government consist of three statutory and three non-statutory representatives. They have been established in all nine new provinces and will oversee local government in the provinces with the provincial administrators. Local Government Demarcation Boards are responsible for making final decisions on local government boundaries. Members to the Boards will be selected through a process of public hearings, similar to those held for the South African Broadcasting Corporation Board.